

Making the Square Peg Fit the Round Hole: Social and Cultural Capital in Pre-college Programs

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Research Problem

Attending college has become of critical importance for many young people. Access to postsecondary education requires a combination of grades, standardized tests, rigorous course taking, and preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). However, students who are economically disadvantaged or who are the first in their family to attend college are significantly less likely to enter four-year universities and earn a degree than their higher income peers. While many economically disadvantaged students do enroll in postsecondary education, they are more likely to be enrolled in community colleges and vocational programs that are correlated with lower earnings and less social mobility (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

While traditional economic factors influence the decision to enter college, other factors, such as cultural and social barriers, may reduce students' chances for educational attainment. This study tries to answer whether cultural and social capital acquired from pre-college programs will positively affect students' educational outcomes. Social and cultural capital is considered separately to determine how cultural activities and social connections and relationships influence educational outcomes. Cultural capital was used to develop the operational definitions from the perspective of Bourdieu (1977; 1985), DiMaggio (1982; 1985), and Aschaffenburg and Mass (1997). Social capital theory from Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1983; 1987) clarifies how social networks and relationships contribute to academic performance and educational attainment.

Research Questions

***RQ1:** Does cultural capital acquired by Upward Bound participants positively affect these students in making educational transitions?*

Cultural capital theory states that those with higher social class already possess more cultural capital by the time they enter school than those children from the lower or

working classes (Bourdieu, 1977; 1985). I predicted that cultural capital acquired from pre-college programs would moderate students' educational attainment. Students who participate in the Upward Bound program are exposed to several cultural activities, such as travel, summer college residential experience, and the arts. It would likely follow that those who are in the program have more opportunities and are encouraged to participate in cultural activities both in the school and within the program. Participation in the summer and academic year program provided more opportunity for students to obtain cultural capital. It was predicted that the benefits of cultural capital acquisition had a positive impact on achievement.

RQ2: Does social capital acquired by Upward Bound participants positively affect these students in making educational transitions?

Research suggests that social capital from peer and adult involvement in education is important for the social and intellectual development of children (Coleman, 1983; 1987; 1988). The connectedness between a child and his/her family, friends, community, and school can translate into higher academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Parental involvement has been shown in the literature to explain academic achievement (Coleman, 1988; McNeal, 1999a; 1999b). Higher levels of family support for education lead to more discussions about schoolwork and greater involvement of the parents with the schools. Parents who are involved with the school are more likely to involve themselves in the schooling process to gain advantages for their child. Higher involvement with the schools leads to better grades for students and increased information sharing with teachers and institutional agents. Parents who are involved in their child's education will encourage their child to attend college and select four-year institutions over two-year institutions. It was predicted that even those from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds would show academic improvement when exposed to social capital from pre-college programs.

Research Methodology:

My study is one of the few to use pre-college programs to study social and cultural capital. An extensive literature review of social and cultural capital theory from Bourdieu, Putnam, and Coleman was used in this research. A longitudinal, repeated measures design from secondary data from a national evaluation of the Upward Bound program was used in the study. The sample was comprised of 2,797 respondents in a treatment group (n=1,524) and a control group (n=1,273). The study operationalized cultural capital as: travel; participation inside and outside of school in art, music, and drama classes; time spent on school-based cultural activities; and cultural resources defined as daily newspapers, regularly received magazines, encyclopedias, atlases, dictionaries, and books (if more than 50 in the home). Social capital measures were operationalized as family support, student-teacher interactions, and extracurricular activities.

Factor analysis, multiple, and logistic regression were used in the analyses. Factor analysis was used to determine whether one or more underlying dimensions, or factors could account for the correlations among a set of variables. A hierarchical multiple regression technique was used to explain ability and postsecondary enrollment behavior

from cultural and social capital variables. The effects of the cultural and social capital on educational transitions were assessed with a logistic regression strategy that modeled a series of dichotomous variables representing each of the two transitions and the type of institution enrolled. There were three dichotomous dependent variables representing educational attainment: graduated from high school; attended postsecondary; and type of institution attended.

Results

The findings supported the idea that social and cultural capital is important in the transmission of educational advantage for low-income students. A central question of the study was whether cultural and social capital variables improved the explanatory model for postsecondary enrollment. In every regression model, adding cultural and social capital variables improved the amount of variance explained in the model. My study showed that students who spent time in culturally based activities and whose parents discussed academics and college opportunities had higher grade point averages and were more likely to graduate from high school, and apply, enroll, and attend a four-year college. Based on the results of this study, a new model is presented for identifying the factors that contribute to educational outcomes for low-income and students whose parents did not attend college. The findings suggest that social and cultural capital variables moderate the relationship between family background and educational outcomes and transitions.

Finally, this study showed that social and cultural capital, whether on the part of the parents, school personnel, or the Upward Bound program, plays a positive role in helping low-income, first-generation students make the transition from high school to college. Family income and education were not shown to have an effect on these outcomes. Therefore, for low-income and first-generation students, doing well in school, graduating from high school, and attending college is dependent on family support and a culturally rich environment.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Social workers need to become more involved in educational attainment. Social workers can help students who are the first in their family to aspire to higher education to: 1) develop a set of skills that allow them to integrate smoothly into new social environments; 2) demand excellence for all students regardless of socioeconomic status; and 3) empower parents to take a more active role in education. Actively teaching students how to engage with teachers in a positive and direct way is a critical area that social workers can use to teach the students to advocate for themselves. Social workers working in school settings need to receive ongoing training in cultural competency in order to address the varied and multi-cultural needs of students. Helping students learn new communication and presentation skills that increase their ability to thrive in different social classes is critical for these students.

This research also suggests that parents, no matter what their income or education level, can contribute to their child's education through involvement in and discussions about school. Social workers can facilitate access for parents by adjusting office hours to make parental participation easier; coaching parents on how to navigate the bicultural environment through improved communication and presentation skills; and exploring parenting styles that may contribute or hinder students' progress. These simple steps can motivate and encourage even the most economically disadvantaged students to succeed.

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Appendix A: Independent Variables Relationship to Dependent Variable

**Summary of Independent Variables Influence on Dependent Variable
by Student Type: Control Group**

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables at Time 1	Independent Variables at Time 2	Independent Variables at Time 3
High School Graduation	Gender Black Parental Discussions Homework Parental Support*	Parental Discussions Extracurricular Homework Black* Parental Academic Support*	Gender Parental Involvement Parental Discussions Homework Black
Applied to college	Gender Time spent on school based cultural activities Parental Discussions Parental Support*	Gender School based cultural activities Parental Discussions Student-Teacher Interaction Extracurricular Parental Academic Support*	Gender Asian Parental Involvement Parental Discussions Parental Academic Support
Attended college	Time spent on school based cultural activities Parental Discussions White* Black*	Parental Discussions White* Black*	Parental Discussion Parental Academic Support*
Attended Four-Year Institution	N/A	Parental Involvement Parental Discussions*	Asian Parental Involvement Parental Academic Support*

All measures were statistically significant at the .05 level or less;

*The direction of influence of the variable was negative or indicated that the odds ratio was less than one.

**Summary of Independent Variables' Influence on Dependent Variable
by Student Type: Upward Bound**

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables at Time 1	Independent Variables at Time 2	Independent Variables at Time 3
High School Graduation	Gender Parental Discussions School based creative arts* Parental Involvement* Parental Support*	Gender Student-Teacher Interaction Participation in 94 Summer Residential Component Parental Discussions Parental Support* Cultural Awareness*	Gender Parental Discipline
Attended College	Parental Involvement*	Parental Discussion Parental Academic Support*	Extracurricular
Attended Four-Year Institution	Time spent on school based cultural activities* Parental Involvement*	Parental Discussion Travel Cultural Awareness* Parental Academic Support*	School based creative arts Travel in Summer Academic Year Travel*

All measures were statistically significant at the .05 level or less;

*The direction of influence of the variable was negative or indicated that the odds ratio was less than one.